

**Introductory remarks at the Brown Bag Lunch session**

**“Informed Democracy:  
Advancing public engagement in Canada’s policy process”**

**School of Policy Studies, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON  
12:00 - 2:00 p.m., October 9, 2003**

**Maureen O’Neil, President  
International Development Research Centre (Canada)**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is always an honour to visit the School of Policy Studies here at Queen’s, and it is a pleasure to take part in the Brown Bag Lecture Series.

The subject I want to raise with you today is a critical (and too-often neglected) element of what many know as the democratic deficit. That missing element is knowledge: timely, relevant, new knowledge that informs and strengthens policy processes, and policy decisions, in a democratic government.

But I will take as my point of departure a powerful case that Tom Axworthy made recently in a *Globe and Mail* book review. I will not presume to condense Tom’s important argument, except to say that he was addressing a serious breakdown of governmental accountability in Ottawa—a breakdown due in part to a harmful confusion between corporate-sector norms and public-sector obligations.

Quoting Professor Axworthy: “To be a citizen is not only about demanding that a service be provided efficiently, it is about being involved in self-government. Public service is not about producing widgets; it is about promoting the public interest in a democracy.” Unquote.

Which is to say, simply, that citizenship consists of much more than consuming government goods and services. It consists of participating in government decisions. Democratic governance is not just about public goods, but about public values. Democratic policy-making is not just about efficiency, but about shared obligation and legitimate purpose. These are not qualities readily measured on any balance sheet. But they are central to any understanding or correction of the democratic deficit.

I would add that active citizen involvement in the policy process is meaningful and productive only if it is informed. People have to understand the hard choices of public policy—and the hard facts that define those choices.

To repeat: Authentically democratic governance demands more than citizen participation. It demands informed participation. This is a crucial point, and I will return to it in a moment.

But there is another problem that needs to be considered as well—the problem of informing policy itself. This is, to put it more accurately, the problem of getting the best and most useful knowledge to policy-makers in a language they understand, and in time to have some effect.

Basing policy on good information sounds like a straightforward and even rudimentary principle of public administration. But after observing policy communities at work for a good many years, I can assure you that satisfying this principle turns out to be one of the most complicated and elusive challenges in the entire policy process.

For policy-makers, the knowledge problem usually comes down either to scarcity or to excess. Either they cannot get enough of the information they think they need, or they suffer what they think is an oversupply—with the consequent problem of sorting the helpful from the useless and distracting.

Some of the most dramatic (and melodramatic) demonstrations of the knowledge problem for policy-makers—especially these days—arise in matters of security intelligence. But the problem prevails throughout the policy agenda. Think of the knowledge needed to design policy for compliance with the Kyoto Protocol, or to balance patent rights with the urgency of producing generic AIDS drugs for Africans, or to protect public health with whatever we have learned from the SARS outbreak.

At my own organization, the International Development Research Centre, we have been especially conscious of the knowledge problem from the other end of the supply chain—from the viewpoint not of the policy-maker but of the researcher, analyst and scholar. For more than 30 years, IDRC has been fulfilling its legislated mandate to promote research for development. And for all those years, we have therefore been concerned with the problem of delivering research that influences policy—and persuades policy-makers.

After all, there is not much practical value in discovering a new and cheap malaria repellent, or a better way to conserve desert water, or innovative approaches to resolving conflict, if this knowledge does not somehow inform and alter government policy.

And if there is one lesson we have learned, it is that researchers must come to understand how policy-makers think—and how policy processes function. They need to understand the timelines of policy decision and execution, the pressures that policy-makers experience, the choices they face. Very often, the science that researchers need most is political science.

We have also undertaken some systematic evaluation studies at IDRC, to see how research in developing countries has actually succeeded in influencing policy. The results of our evaluation are worth mentioning here, because they apply with as much force to a rich industrial democracy as to the poorest developing country.

Evaluation shows that policy influence requires researchers (and anyone else trying to impart new knowledge to policy-makers) to deploy strategic communication techniques. Knowledge does not flow from research to policy decision automatically, or by chance. It requires transmission—in a form that will attract policy-makers’ attention.

We also know that policy influence requires researchers to address local concerns, local interests, local conditions and local values. That is the only way policy-makers will take ownership of the new knowledge, and put it into practice.

Policy influence requires persistence. Doing good research—and establishing a reputation for it—can take years. Sometimes, research only becomes policy when the researcher becomes a policy-maker.

And policy influence is maximized when the intention to influence policy is built into the research design from the start. This means building in routine consultations between researchers and the policy community. It means seizing opportunities to inform decisions when those opportunities occur—for a trade negotiation, say, or a suddenly needed new piece of legislation. It means financing these kinds of policy interchange in flexible research budgets. And it means, at a more personal level, engaging in the ordinary, informal relationship-building that can create long-term access and individual trust between researchers and policy-makers.

I should tell you that some researchers resist these rules as unworthy of their energies, and recoil from any such “fraternization” as a contamination of their intellectual calling. But evaluation consistently shows that failure by researchers to institutionalize these connections with policy-makers and the policy process will block knowledge from influencing policy—and consign that research to practical irrelevance.

As I have said, good governance demands more than good information. In fact, good governance happens in the interaction of knowledge creation and genuine citizen participation. Through engagement, research and discovery, citizens learn. Policy decisions are improved. And the actions of governments carry a more durable and a more just legitimacy.

This is why the democratic deficit cannot be corrected just by enlarging popular participation in government—although that is essential. Righting the democratic deficit—making government more open, more participatory—means informing that participation with a more knowledgeable and thoughtful citizenry.

At IDRC we see this as a core imperative of democratic and sustainable development: engaging people broadly in the policy process, identifying their real choices, deciding their futures, and sharing responsibility for those decisions.

Canadians face the same challenges. We need to create new procedures for people to speak their minds—and to change their minds. And we need to organize research that can inform the policy choices we make, to make them fairer and more effective.

So, how do we activate and arrange this informed and deliberative public participation? Allow me to offer a bold and radical answer: royal commissions.

It must be said, and I have to concede, there is something quaint and even a little mouldy about the very expression “royal commission”. But many of Canada’s old royal commissions present us with a convincing model for a better way of governance. Lessons for improving democracy. For engaging Canadians more knowledgeably—and more powerfully—in the public decisions that govern our lives. And for applying useful research in the service of a more open and democratic government.

There are plenty of examples. I would cite the Carter commission on taxation; the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism; the Hall commission of the 1960s that set out the blueprint for Medicare; the Macdonald commission and its 1985 report recommending free trade with the United States; and the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, which laid the foundations for legislation across Canada and even abroad.

I would especially look to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, led by Florence Bird. Its report in 1970 contained no fewer than 167 recommendations, addressing the real lives and real prospects of Canadian girls and women. It examined tax policy and education, the Indian Act and health care, reproductive rights, child care, and the Criminal Code.

More than that, and probably even more significantly, that commission combined an unprecedented degree of citizen participation in its hearings with an array of ground-breaking and illuminating research—research that explored women’s lives by asking questions never asked before.

All of this effort had strong effect. Something like 80 per cent of those 167 recommendations have since been implemented by federal and provincial governments. The lives of Canadian women have changed as a result. And the “status of women” has been embedded permanently in the public and political policy agenda.

It’s true that governments in the last 20 years have resorted to royal commissions less frequently than in earlier decades. It’s also true that past prime ministers have set up royal commissions with motives not always high-minded: to procrastinate, or to construct cover from scandal, or to shift accountability for some risky or unpopular policy decision.

Nonetheless, the good use of royal commissions has demonstrated their abundant value, and their utility in improving Canadian democracy. They can serve an essential purpose—facilitating that necessary interaction of genuine citizen engagement with the discovery and consideration of new knowledge.

I will conclude by emphasizing the obvious fact that the virtuous potential inherent in royal commissions is vastly enriched by the new technologies of information and communications. We

have scarcely begun to exploit these possibilities.

Just this year, for example, the Department of Foreign Affairs (through the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development) conducted an Internet-based “Foreign Policy Dialogue” that included an interactive Web site, town hall meetings with ministers, parliamentary hearings and reports, and some 19 expert roundtables across the country. It was launched in January with a briefing paper setting out some of the basic policy questions, and concluded in June with an interesting overview paper introduced by Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham.

Over those six months, the Dialogue Web site recorded an impressive 60,000 visits, and 28,000 downloads of the January policy paper. The Dialogue was a remarkable innovation.

To take a different example—and one no doubt familiar to many of you—we have the very promising trials of deliberative polling, a methodology pioneered by Jim Fishkin at the University of Texas in Austin. As you know, deliberative polling takes a random, representative sample of a population through a disciplined exercise of learning and discussion. Instead of top-of-the-head opinions, what usually emerge are judgments much better informed—and often less polarized—on contentious policy questions.

Not long ago, Fishkin and his colleagues conducted their first online deliberative poll, on the subject of U.S. foreign policy. Again, a statistically representative national sample of Americans was assembled—but this time on the Web, with voice connections. (People without computers were provided with equipment and training.)

The results of the online deliberation were strikingly similar to a face-to-face deliberative poll carried out with the same materials at about the same time. While face-to-face changes of mind tended to be somewhat larger than online opinion shifts, the direction of change was the same. (By the way, the more these American participants learned and talked, the more generally internationalist and multilateralist they tended to become.)

In Canada, IDRC has been collaborating in a similar project organized by the Canadian Policy Research Networks, called the “Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future”. The methodology in this project is the so-called “ChoiceWork Dialogue” approach, based on the research of Daniel Yankelovich. Here again, the objective is to gather a representative population sample and work through conflicting choices and values in a process of learning and moderated discussion. And again, our experience is that sharp differences—and initial cynicism about government—tend to resolve, over just few hours, into considerable consensus on issues of domestic economic policy, international development, poverty, environment, and health.

We can correct the democratic deficit.

In the tradition of royal commissions, with the power and speed of Internet communications and information-sharing, Canadians can reform the procedures of our democracy. We can make the

policy process more inclusive, better informed, more transparent, and more productive. And so we must.

Thank you.